A SISTER'S VENGEANCE

By GEORGE MANVILLE FENN

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

"Curse them!" cried Abel, as he reached the other side of the point, and saw that which his sister had seen from the cliff behind the cottage.

He looked round him for a fresh way of escape. There was the sea, if they liked to leap in and swim; but they could be easily overtaken. The rocks above them were too overhanging to climb, and there was no other way, unless they returned, and tried to rush through their pursuers; for beyond the point the tide beat upon the cliff.

"No good, Bart; we're trapped," said Abel, stolidly. "I'll never forgive her—never!"

"Yes, you will," said Bart, sitting down on a rock, and carefully taking off his fur cap to wipe his heated brow. "You will some day. Why, I could forgive her anything—I could. She's a wonderful gell; but, I say, my hips are werry sore."

He sat staring down at the boat beyond the point, the anchor having been taken on board, and the oars being out to keep her off the rocks, as she rose and fell with the coming tide.

"No!" said Abel, bitterly. "I'll never forgive her—never!"

"Nay, lad, don't say that," said Bart, rubbing one side. "Hey, lass! There she is. Top o' the cliff. Look at her, mate."

"No," said Abel; "let her look—at her cowardly work.

"Now, then!" shouted the head constable, as he came panting up. "Is it surrender, or fight?"

For answer, Abel climbed slowly down to the sands, followed by Bart; and the next minute they were surrounded and stood with gyves upon their wrists.

"Warm work," said the constable, cheerfully; "but we've got you safe now."

In silence the party with their prisoners walked slowly back, and beneath the spot where Mary stood like a figure carved out of rock, far above their heads, till they had gone out of sight, without once looking up or making a sign.

Then the poor girl sank down in the rocky niche where she had climbed first, and burst into an agonised fit of weeping.

"Father — mother — brother—all gone! Lover false! Alone—alone—alone!" she sobbed. "What have I done to deserve it all? Nothing!" she cried, fiercely, as she sprang to her feet and turned and shok her clinched fists landward. "Nothing but love a cold, cruel wretch. Yes, love; and now—oh, how I hate him—and all the world!"

She sank down again in the niche all of a heap, and sat there with the sun slowly sinking lower, and the seabirds wheeling round and round above her head, and watching her with inquisitive eyes, as they each now and then uttered a mournful wail, which sounded sympathetic.

And there she sat, hour after hour, till it was quite dark, when she began slowly to descend, asking herself what she should do to save her brother and his friend, both under a misconception, but suffering for her sake.

"And I stay here!" she said, passionately. "Let them think what they will, I'll try and save them, for they must be in prison now."

Mary was quite right; for as night fell Abel Dell and Bart, his companion, were partaking of a very frugal meal, and made uncomfortable by the fact that it was not good, and that they—men free to come and go on sea and land—were now safely caged behind a massive iron grill.

"Well," said Bart, at last, "I'm only sorry for one thing now."

"What's that—Mary being so base?"

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"Nay, I'm sorry for that," replied Bart, "but what I meant was that I didn't give the captain one hard 'un on the head."

CHAPTER V.

The laws were tremendously stringent in those days when it was considered much easier to bring an offender's bad career to an end than to keep him at the nation's expense; and when the stealing of a sheep was considered a crime to be punished with death an attack upon the sacred person of one of the king's officers by a couple of notorious law-breakers was not likely to be looked upon leniently by a judge well known for stern sentences.

But a jury of Devon men was sitting upon the offense of Abel Dell and Bart Wrigley, and feeling disposed to deal easily with a couple of young fellows whose previous bad character was all in connection with smuggling, a crime with the said jury of a very light dye, certainly not black. Abel and Bart escaped the rope, and were sentenced to transportation to one of his majesty's colonies in the West Indies, there to do convict work in connection with plantations, or the making of roads, as their task masters might think fit.

Time glided by, and Mary Dell found that her life at home had become insupportable.

She was not long in finding that, now that she was left alone and unprotected, she was not to be free from persecution. Her contemptuous rejection of Captain Armstrong's advances seemed to have the effect of increasing his persecution; and one evening at the end of a couple of months, Mary Dell sat on one of the rocks outside the cottage door, gazing out to sea, and watching the ships sail westward, as she wondered whether those on board would ever see the brother who seemed to be all that was left to her in this world.

That particular night the thought which had been hatching in her brain ever since Abel had been sent away flew forth fully fledged and ready, and she rose from where she had been sitting in the evening sunshine, and walked into the cottage.

She went into her brother Abel's bedroom, where she stayed for some minutes, and then, with a quick, resolute step, she re-entered the cottage kitchen, thrust the few embers together that burned upon the hearth, took a pair of scissors from a box, and again seated herself before a glass.

The sun was setting, and filled the slate-floored kitchen with light which flashed back from the blurred looking glass, and cast a furious glare in the girl's stern countenance, with its heavy, dark brows, sun-browned, ruddy cheeks, and gleaming eyes.

Snip!

The sharp scissors had passed through one lock of the massive black tresses which she had shaken over her shoulders, and which then rippled to the cottage floor.

Snip!

Another cut, and two locks had fallen.

Then rapidly snip, snip, snip—a curious thick, sharp snip—and the great waves of glorious hair kept falling as the bare, sun-burned, ruddy arm played here and there; and the steel blades glittered and opened and closed, as if arm, hand and scissors formed the neck, head and angry bill of some fierce bird attacking that well-shaped head, and at every snap took off a thick tress of hair.

An hour later, just as the red moon rose slowly above the surface of the sea, a sturdy looking young man, with a stout stick in one hand—the very stick which had helped to belabor Captain Armstrong—and a bundle tied up in a handkerchief beneath his arm, stepped out of the cottage, changed the key from inside to outside, closed the old door, locked it, dragged out the key, and with a sudden jerk sent it flying far out into deep water beyond the rocks. Then the figure turned once more to the cottage, gazed at it fixedly for a few moments, took a step or two away; but sprang back directly with an exceeding bitter cry, and kissed the rough, unpainted woodwork again and again with rapid action, and then dashed off to the foot of the cliff and climbed rapidly to the sheep track—the faintly seen path that led toward Slapton Lea and the old hall, where the captain still stayed with his young wife, and then joined the west road which led to Plymouth.

She strode on manfully for another quarter of a mile, when all at once there was a stoppage, for another figure was seen coming from the direction of Torcross, and the moon shining full upon the face showed plainly who it was.

There was no question of identity, for that evening Captain James Armstrong—whose journey had been postponed—had snubbed his young wife cruelly, quarreled with his cousin Humphrey, who had been there to dine, and then left the house, determined to go down to Mary Dell's solitary cottage.

"Who's this?" muttered the captain. "Humph! sailor on the tramp to Plymouth. Well, he won't know me. I won't turn back."

He strode on a dosen yards and then stopped short, as the figure before him had stopped a few moments before; and then a change came over the aspect of the captain. His knees shook, his face turned wet, and his throat grew dry.

It was horrible; but there could be no mistake.

"Abel Dell!" he cried, hoarsely, as he leaped at the idea that the brother had returned in spirit, to save his sister from all harm.

"Out of my path!" rang forth in answer, the voice being loud, imperious and fierce; and then, in a tone of intense hatred and suppressed passion, the one word—"Dog!"

As the last word rang out there was a whistling as of a stick passing through the air, a tremendous thud, and the captain fell headlong upon the rocky ground.

Then there was utter silence as the young sailor placed one foot upon the prostrate man's chest, stamped upon it savagely, and strode on right away over the wild country bordering the sea.

The figure loomed up once in the moonlight, as the captain rose slowly upon one elbow and gazed after it, to see that it seemed to be of supernatural proportions, and then he sank back again with a groan.

"It's a spirit," he said, "come back to her;" and then the poltroon fainted dead away.

CHAPTER VI.

Someone was singing a west-country ditty. There was a pause in the singing, and the striking of several blows with a rough hoe, to the destruction of weeds in a coffee plantation; while, as the chops of the hoe struck the clods of earth, the fetters worn by the striker gave forth faint clinks.

"Oh, I say, Abel, mate; don't, lad, don't."

"Don't what?" said Abel Dell, resting upon his hoe, and looking up at big Bart Wrigley, clothed like himself, armed with a hoe, and also decorated with fetters, as he stood wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Don't sing that there old song. It do make me feel so unked."

"Unked, Bart? Well, what if it does? These are unked days."

"Ay; but each time you sings that I seem to see the rocks along by the shore at home, with the ivy hanging down, and the sheep feeding, and the sea rolling in, and the blue sky, with gulls a-flying; and it makes me feel like a boy again, and, big as I am, as if I should cry."

"Always were like a big boy, Bart. Hoe away, lad; the overseer's looking."

Bart went on chopping weeds, diligently following his friend's example, as a sour-looking, yellow-faced man came by in company with a soldier loosely shouldering his musket. But they passed by without speaking, and Abel continued:

"There's sea here, and blue sky and sunshine."

"Ay," said Bart; "there's sunshine hot enough to fry a mack'rel. Place is right enough if you was free; but it aren't home, Abel, it aren't home."

"Home! no," said the young man, savagely. "But we have no home. She spoiled that."

"Ah, you're a hard 'un, Abel," remarked Bart, after a time.

"Yes; and you're a soft 'un, Bart. She could always turn you round her little finger."

"Ay, bless her; and she didn't tell on us."

"Yes, she did," said Abel, sourly; and he turned back upon his companion, and toiled away to hide the working of his face.

The sun shone down as hotly as it can shine in the West Indies, and the coarse shirts the young men wore showed patches of moisture where the perspiration came through; but they worked on, for the labor deadened the misery in their breasts.

"How long have we been here, mate?" said Bart, after a pause.

"Dunno," replied Abel, fiercely.

"How long will they keep us in this here place?" said Bart, after another interval, and he looked from the beautiful shore at the bottom of the slope on which they worked to the cluster of stone and wood-built buildings, which formed the prison and the station farm, with factory and mill, all worked by convict labor, while those in the neighborhood were managed by blacks.

Abel did not answer, only scowled fiercely; and Bart sighed and repeated his question.

"Till we die!" said Abel, savagely; "same as we've seen other fellows die—of fever, and hard work, and the lash. Curse the captain! Curse——"

Bart clapped one hand over his companion's lips, and he held the other behind his head, dropping his hoe to leave full liberty to act.

"I never quarrels with you, Abel, lad," he said, shortly; "but if you says words again that poor gell, I'm going to fight—and that won't do. Is it easy?"

Abel seemed disposed to struggle; but he gave in, nodded his head, and Bart loosed him and picked up his hoe, just as the overseer, who had come softly up behind, brought down the whip he carried with stinging violence across the shoulders of first one and then the other.

The young men sprang round savagely; but there was a sentry close behind, musket-armed and with bayonet fixed, and they knew that fifty soldiers were within call, and that if they struck their taskmaster down and made for the jungle they would be hunted out with dogs, be shot down like wild beasts, or die of starvation, as other unfortunates had died before them.

There was nothing for it but to resume their labor and hoe to the clanking of their fetters, while, after a promise of what was to follow, in the shape of tying up to the triangles, and the cat, if they quarreled again, the overseer went on to see to the others of his flock.

"It's worse than a dog's life!" said Abel, bitterly. "A dog does get petted as well as kicked. Bart, lad, I'm sorry I got you that lash."

"Nay, lad; never mind," said Bart. "I'm sorry for you; but don't speak hard things of Mary."

"I'll try not," said Abel, as he hoed away excitedly; "but I hope this coffee we grow may poison those who drink it."

Bart was close up to a dense patch of forest—one wild tangle of cane and creeper, which literally tied the tall trees together and made the forest impassable—when the shrieking of a kind of jay which had been flitting about excitedly stopped, and was followed by the melodious whistle of a white bird and the twittering of quite a flock of little fellows of a gorgeous scvarlet crimson. Then the shrieking of several parrots answering each other arose; while just above Bart's head, where clusters of trumpet-blossoms hung down from the edge of the forest, scores of brilliantly scaled humming birds literally buzzed about on almost transparent wing, and then suspended themselves in midair as they probed the nectaries of the flowers with their long bills. Bart glanced at his fellow-convict and was about to work back, when there came a sound from out the dark forest which made him stare wildly, and then the sound arose again. Bart changed color and did not stop to hoe, but walked rapidly across to Abel.

"What's the matter?" said the latter.

"Dunno, lad," said the other, rubbing his brow with his arm; "but there's something wrong."

"What is it?"

"That's what I dunno; but just now something said quite plain, 'Bart, Bart!'"

"Nonsense! You were dreaming."

"Nay. I was wide awake as I am now, and as I turned and stared it said it again."

"Poll parrot," said Abel, gruffly. "Go on with your work. Here's the overseer."

The young men worked away, and their supervisor passed them, and, apparently satisfied, continued his journey round.

"May have been a poll parrot," said Bart. "They do talk plain, Abel, lad; but this sounded like something else."

"What else could it be?"

"Sounded like a ghost."

Abel burst into a hearty laugh—so hearty that Bart's face was slowly overspread by a broad smile.

"Why, lad, that's better," he said, grimly. "I ar'n't seen you do that for months. Work away."

The hint was given because of the overseer glancing in their direction; and they now worked on together slowly, going down the row toward the jungle, at which Bart kept on darting uneasy glances.

"Enough to make a man laugh to hear you talk of ghosts, Bart," said Abel, after a time.

"What could it be, then?"

"Parrot some lady tamed," said Abel, shortly, as they worked on side by side, "escaped to the woods again. Some of these birds talk just like a Christian."

"Ay," said Bart, after a few moments' quiet thought; "I've heerd 'em, lad; but there's no poll parrot out here as knows me."

"Knows you?"

"Well, didn't I tell you as it called me 'Bart, Bart!'"

"Sounded like it," said Abel, laconically. "What does he want?"

For just then the overseer shouted, and signed to the gangmen to come to him.

"To begin another job—log-rolling, I think," growled Bart, shouldering his hoe.

At that moment, as Abel followed his example, there came in a low, eager tone of voice from out of the jungle, twenty yards away:

"Bart!—Abel!—Abel!"

"Don't look," whispered Abel, who reeled as if struck, and recovered himself to catch his companion by the arm. "All right!" he said aloud; "we'll be here tomorrow. We must go."

CHAPTER VII.

It was quite a week before the two young men were at work in the plantation of young trees again, and during all that time they had feverishly discussed the voice they had heard. Every time they approached the borders of the plantation where it ran up to the virgin forest they had been on the qui vive, expecting to hear their names called again, but only to be disappointed; and, after due consideration, Abel placed a right interpretation upon the reason.

"It was someone who got ashore from a boat," he said, "and managed to crawl up there. It's the only place where anyone could get up."

"No, old mate would take all that trouble for us, lad. It's someone Mary's sent to bring us a letter and a bit of news."

It was at night in the prison lines that Bart said this, and then he listened wonderingly in the dark, for he heard something like a sob from close to his elbow.

"Abel, matey!" he whispered.

"Don't talk to me, old lad," came back hoarsely after a time. And then, after a long silence, "Yes, you're right. Poor lass—poor lass!"

"Say that again, Abel; say that again," whispered Bart, excitedly.

"Poor lass! I've been too hard on her. She didn't get us took."

"Thank God!"

These were Bart's hoarsely whispered words, choked with emotion; and directly after, as he lay there, Abel Dell felt a great, rough, trembling hand pass across his face and search about him till it reached his own, which it gripped and held with a strong, firm clasp, for there was beneath Bart's rough, husk-like exterior a great deal of the true, loyal material of which English gentlemen are made; and when toward morning those two prisoners fell asleep in their chains, hand was still gripped in hand, while the dreams that brightened the remaining hours of their rest from penal labor were very similar, being of a rough home down beneath Devon's lovely cliffs, where the sea ran sparkling over the clean-washed pebbles, and the handsome face of Mary smiled upon each in turn.

(To be continued.)

Getting a sealskin cloak is almost as great an event in a girl's life as getting married.

The best way not to obtain praise is to ask for it.